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SUBJECT: PRT ANBAR: VOTER REGISTRATION - GETTING THE WORD OUT THROUGH TRADITIONAL MEANS

REF: BAGHDAD 1334

Classified By: PRT Anbar Team Leader Jim Soriano
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) This is a PRT Anbar reporting cable.

SUMMARY

¶2. (C) PRT members met with the head of the Sunni Endowment in Anbar Province, Sheikh Abdullah Jallal al-Faraj, to discuss upcoming voter registration and to propose that the Sunni Endowment utilize the traditional Friday evening mosque sermons to stress the importance of voter registration. Abdullah agreed. The head of Anbar's Governorate Electoral Office, Khalil Rijab Abdul-Razak, also embraced the idea, saying he will work with Abdullah to make sure it is done. Khalil told us that Anbar will be ready for provincial elections, even if they are held as early as October. He described his efforts to get the word out about voter registration through posters, pamphlets, Civil Society Organizations, and tribal leaders. END SUMMARY.

ENERGIZING THE ELECTORATE

¶3. (C) On July 5, PRT Political Officer met with the head of the Sunni Endowment in Anbar Province, Abdullah Jallal al-Faraj, to discuss upcoming voter registration currently scheduled to begin July 15 and the importance of ensuring an energized Anbari electorate for upcoming provincial elections. Abdullah, a moderate cleric who works closely with Coalition Forces and PRT Anbar, was a key player in getting an anti-Al Qaeda and pro-U.S. message out on the streets in Anbar in 2006 and 2007. This helped turn the tide against the insurgency and build confidence in Coalition Forces and the GOI (reftel). Abdullah, a pudgy, clean-shaven former soccer-player-turned-Imman, garbed in traditional Arab robe and "Chaffiya" headdress, agreed that Anbaris must turn in a better showing than was the case in the 2005 elections. Then, only about two percent of Anbar's population voted as a result of a Sunni election boycott and violence in the province. The terrorists have been chased out, and Anbaris now know how important it is to participate in elections, he told us. He added that Anbaris want to vote this time around.

A TRIED AND TRUE METHOD OF COMMUNICATION

¶4. (C) During the meeting, Abdullah responded enthusiastically to a PRT proposal that the Sunni Endowment utilize the traditional Friday evening mosque sermons to pass along what would in effect be a non-partisan public service announcement about the importance of voter registration. (Note: Abdullah has told us on previous occasions that the sermons, which are coordinated by the Sunni Endowment, reach about 500,000 Anbaris every week). PRT Officer passed Abdullah a voter registration fact sheet drafted and approved by the Independent Higher Electoral Commission (IHEC), and

suggested Abdullah draw on the fact sheet to develop a message about voter registration, as well as coordinate with the head of Anbar's Governorate Electoral Office (GEO), Khalid Rijab Abdul-Razak. Abdullah, who worked in the past with Khalid on Ramadi's Jazeera Council, said he knew and respected Khalid and that he would coordinate a message with him on the importance of voter registration, which would be disseminated widely to Anbaris.

"WE WILL BE READY FOR ELECTIONS"

¶ 15. (C) On July 6, PRT Political Officer met with GEO head Khalid at his central Ramadi office, which is heavily guarded by Iraqi Police. Khalid and his staff are tasked by the GOI with organizing and executing elections in Anbar. Sitting behind a massive desk in a dress shirt and tie, with his suit coat hanging on a rack alongside his Glock pistol, tucked in a leather holster, a beaming Khalid told PRT Officer that Anbar will be ready for elections, even if they are held in October. He said that although a passive voter registration system is in place throughout Iraq, keyed to the country's national food distribution system, the list is in some cases out of date, and does not include all Anbaris eligible to vote. If Anbaris don't ensure that they are on the list or actively register, they could be turned away come election day. Khalid told us that one of his priorities is encouraging all Anbaris to make sure they are registered during the July 15-August 14 registration period.

¶ 16. (C) PRT Officer informed Khalid that Sunni Endowment head Abdullah Jallal had agreed the day before to emphasize the

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importance of voter registration through the Endowment's network by getting the word out through the Friday night sermons. Khalid told us he would be happy to work with Abdullah) who he described as an old friend and colleague) to see that this is done. He added that working through the Endowment's network would add an authoritative and respected voice to the call for voter registration and participation in elections.

TAPPING INTO A NASCENT CIVIL SOCIETY

¶ 17. (C) Khalid described how his staff has already disseminated 9,000 posters and pamphlets throughout Anbar to raise awareness of voter registration. His staff has also provided training to members of six Iraqi Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), approved by the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), that are raising awareness for the need to register. Furthermore, they are training CSO members to be Voter Registration Center workers. In addition to CSOs, he told us he has met with key tribal leaders, including the leader of Anbar's main political opposition party, Sheikh Ahmad Abu Risha. Sheikh Ahmad and other prominent sheikhs have promised to get the word out in their tribal areas about the need to register, Khalid told us.

¶ 18. (C) There are 28 Voter Registration Centers distributed throughout Anbar, Khalid said. Voter registration material printed in Dubai is currently on its way to Baghdad and will be brought to Anbar within a week. Khalid told us that he was confident his office could arrange for the distribution of all the material to the Voter Registration Centers once it arrives in Ramadi.

COMMENT

¶ 19. (C) Sunni Endowment head Abdullah Jallal has told us on a number of occasions that he is willing to work openly with the U.S. to promote our shared goals of democracy, tolerance, and moderation. Recently, he offered to go on television showing both him and his wife registering to vote (reftel) in

an effort to show Anbaris that women could and should participate in the democratic process. His agreement to use the Friday evening sermons to spread the word about voter registration could be the most effective method of making a large number of Anbaris aware of their civic duty. His willingness to work with the head of Anbar's electoral office and use the mosques as a means of communication achieves this goal without any visible U.S. participation. His moral authority, and that of moderate clerics in Anbar, should increase the effectiveness of the message. END COMMENT.

CROCKER